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Thursday, June 16, 2005  
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## **REASSESSMENT ADVOCATED: Panel looks at BLM land accounting**

**Agency official says in-house improvements being made**

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**WASHINGTON** -- The Bureau of Land Management needs to do a better job of accounting for its vast land holdings in the West but a major recataloging is not necessary, an agency official told Congress on Wednesday.

The BLM is upgrading data systems that detail the 261.8 million acres the agency manages, mostly in 13 Western states, according to deputy director Jim Hughes.

"For the BLM, the problem is a data-collecting and reporting issue," Hughes said. "We do not believe that it is in the interest of the federal government or the taxpayers to undertake a major reassessment of lands owned by the federal government.

"However, we recognize we need to do a better job of collecting and reporting data, and we have begun that process" through in-house improvements, Hughes said in written testimony to a House forests subcommittee reviewing federal land ownership.

The Interior Department uses more than 100 property databases across dozens of computer operating systems. Some lawmakers contend the BLM does not have an accurate picture of what it owns.

Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, said one BLM estimate of federal land in Utah dropped from 66.5 percent to 57 percent in a year, but "the only thing that changed was BLM accounting."

Cannon has introduced a bill that would direct the secretary of the interior to create a master property database to catalog its holdings.

The hearing provided a new opening for some Western lawmakers to complain that states and local counties are robbed of millions of dollars because the government dominates land ownership and cannot be taxed.

Making the problem worse, they said, was perennial underfunding of the "payment in lieu of taxes" program that is supposed to compensate counties.

One lawmaker, Rep. Tom Udall, D-N.M., said the complaints are overstated. He said revenue-sharing from federal mineral leasing, grazing fees and forestland receipts benefit local communities.

Several lawmakers including Rep. Jim Gibbons, R-Nev., complained the BLM is adding to its inventory while facing <http://reviewjournal.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?action=cpt&title=reviewjournal.com+---+News%3A...> 6/16/2005

budget shortfalls to care for land it already manages.

Gibbons said there is a troubling component to the 1998 Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act, which requires BLM to sell off excess federal land in Clark County.

While the law has been "a great success," Gibbons said some profits are used to buy up other private land. The act allows for government purchase of environmentally sensitive tracts in Nevada, but Gibbons said funds can't be spent to care for the new holdings.

"So even as we are disposing of land, the BLM and other federal agencies are acquiring more land," Gibbons said. "Even with the disposal of lands, I have yet to hear a BLM employee tell me they have enough funding to manage and care for the lands in their possession.

"This has always troubled me," said Gibbons, who is studying possible legislation to change the law.

Hughes gave the subcommittee statistics showing the BLM between 2000 and 2004 disposed of 72,901 acres of federal land in Nevada while adding only 38,655 acres, meaning a net drop in the government's presence.

Gibbons said he was skeptical of the numbers. "Nobody knows what the real numbers are," he said.

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